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# Labor History Symposium: Gerald Friedman, Reigniting the Labor Movement

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**Authors**

Craig Phelan, Frances Fox Piven, Catherine Collomp, Guy Groux, Michael Hanagan, and Gerald Friedman

***Labor History* symposium: Gerald Friedman, *Reigniting the Labor Movement***

**Reigniting the Labor Movement: Restoring Means to Ends in a Democratic Labor Movement, by Gerald Friedman**

London and New York, Routledge, 2008, ISBN 0415770718

**Editorial note**

When trade union growth worldwide came to a halt in the 1980s, a wide body of literature appeared on the causes of trade union decline. Since that time an even more substantial number of books and articles have been penned on the possibility of trade union revitalization: which combination of factors might lead to resurgence; what organizational forms are best suited to the new political and economic landscape; which goals, strategies and tactics are most likely to spark a reversal of trade unionism's fortunes. Gerald Friedman, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts and the US editor of this journal, has contributed impressively to these ongoing debates in his *Reigniting the Labor Movement*. One of the strengths of this important book is its historical and transnational approach. Friedman skilfully weaves together a century's worth of data from 16 countries to support his principal argument that strikes hold the key to any understanding of the rise, decline and possible resurgence of the labour movement. Trade unions, he argues, must enhance internal democracy in order to facilitate militancy. An indispensable book for all concerned with the present and future prospects of trade unionism, *Reigniting the Labor Movement* is here examined by four of the leading authorities on that subject.

Craig Phelan  
*Editor*

**Comments on *Reigniting the Labor Movement***

The main argument of Gerald Friedman's book can be stated simply. It has two parts. First, upsurges of strike activity have historically been the main expression of labor's democratic aspirations. The important strike movements were essentially spontaneous rebellions by workers, collective actions that challenged authority and celebrated the democratic capacities of workers themselves. Friedman calls this a 'collective effervescence' (p. 69). As such, they were unpredictable, escaping – and here Friedman acknowledges his debt to Rosa Luxemburg – the logic of rational calculation by participants of the advantages they could gain or the costs they would bear. The strike as movement is thus what Aristide Zohberg called a 'moment of madness', an expression he coined to describe not only strikes but a variety

of historical episodes that seemed to be fueled not by sober calculation of potential costs and benefits but by collective seizures of utopian hope. Friedman elaborates this characterization with descriptions of the French strike movement of the 1930s, as well as British and American strike movements. Moments of madness are times of extraordinary, even inexplicable, defiance and hope. They also give rise to spectacular innovations, such as the sit-down strike with its frontal challenge to property rights. In sum, the mass strike is the very essence of the democratic aspirations at the heart of the labor movement.

However, and this is the second part of the argument, strike movements lead to the growth of unions, and unions inevitably tamp down labor militancy. Here Friedman presents data from 16 countries as well as France, the USA and England. Strikes are especially likely to lead to union growth at times of war, or if Left governments are in power. The reasons are evident. At such times, both employers and governments are more vulnerable, and so, frightened by the disruptive power of the strikers, throw their support behind unions, and the labor laws that sustain unions, as the lesser evil. Left governments are no exception. Indeed, Left governments may be especially ready to push for restraint because it is their ability to curb rank-and-file militancy that often brings them to office. Thus, unions and collective bargaining contracts, as well as labor laws that make concessions to workers but cage their strike power, are a temporary advantage to employers and governments because together they can curb unrest. This, Friedman argues, is a Faustian bargain because the growth of labor unions and the institutionalization of left parties leads to the atrophy of the mass strike and the democratic power it expresses. Friedman (pp. 131–132) summarizes the process: ‘Almost without exception, *every* union and *every* socialist party has followed the same trajectory from shop floor militancy to organization, collective bargaining, and the establishment of union hierarchy’. In other words, the strike movement and the democratic hopes it expresses sets in motion a process that ends in business unionism, in organizational hierarchy and a union bureaucracy dominated by paid staff devoted to the maintenance of the bureaucracy. Inevitably this also means an organization devoted to controlling worker militancy because that is the price the bureaucracy must pay for its continuing existence.

Moreover, there is no way out of the quandary because unions that do not keep their part of the bargain will be crushed. When unions fail to control worker militancy, they lose the support of both employers and governments. Friedman illustrates this part of his argument with a discussion of employer and government responses to the wave of militancy that seized French workers in the 1930s, of American industrial strikes during the same period, and of the militant British worker movement that began in the late 1960s and ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher. In fact, in the British case a new generation of radical union leaders promising an expansive economic democracy were actually in the forefront of the strike movement. The unions were not performing their appointed role of curbing labor militancy, and so, by the end of the 1970s after the ‘winter of discontent’ when a sanitation strike left the streets of London buried in garbage, the failure of labor’s leaders to suppress worker militancy had helped to produce a Thatcherite reaction and a ‘frontal attack on unions’ (p. 150), to be followed by a

radical internal shift in the Labor Party under the leadership of Tony Blair when the unions were stripped of their traditional standing within the party. In sum, says Friedman, whether unions succeed or fail in disciplining unruly workers, 'a bureaucratized Labor Movement appears unsustainable' (p. 30).

Although I have quibbles with some of Friedman's history, perhaps he slices and dices events a bit too much to fit the argument, I broadly agree with his characterization of the dynamic of labor's successes and their institutionalization. That said, the dichotomy he creates between the politics of the mass strike and the politics of unions is overstated, leaving us in the end only with the quandary. If labor mobilizes and becomes a threat to capital and the state, it will be offered the opportunity to institutionalize, on condition that the unions thus created work to discipline labor. The bargain is almost always accepted, but when it is refused, employers and government turn their guns on labor. Is there a solution? When Friedman turns to the question of what workers and their unions should do, his argument becomes a series of rather thin and familiar injunctions. He calls for a labor movement that shuns the reformist project of unionism in favor of cultivating a democratic consciousness within the movement. Instead of mainly battling for higher wages or better working conditions, he wants labor to build 'little democracies' (p. 161) that are models for a future society. Not only does this ignore the fact that unions exist, and that most workers want them and want whatever protections they offer, but it also leaves unexplained how little democracies will be transformed into a big societal democracy. Instead we are left with the classic utopian faith that good ideas will somehow become dominant ideas, and that these ideas that will somehow be translated into successful revolutionary action, no matter the opposition.

Running through Friedman's analysis and ultimately accounting for his conclusions is a rather strange (given his topic) vacuousness about the question of the nature of labor power. He seems to think labor does not have any power. The mass strike is a threat to elites to be sure, but it is not the specific threat of withdrawing labor and halting production or services, of shutting it down, which has always been treated by the Left as the essence of labor power. Rather for Friedman the mass strike is significant for the widespread unrest it generates. (Numbers are another source of power that Friedman mentions, but this theme is not discussed so we do not know if he is thinking of the threat of the mob or of the threat of masses of voters.) For the most part, Friedman thinks labor has to import power through the allies it cultivates, it has to gain 'the support of greater powers and authorities *outside* the working class, employers, state officials, and middle-class observers' (p. 57). This understanding of labor's weakness runs through Friedman's arguments. For example, he sees the decision by workers to participate in the collective action of the mass strike as essentially irrational or non-rational. In utilitarian terms, the worker would always do better by negotiating individually with the employer, or by free-riding on the collective action of others. This characterization seems to me inconsistent with the considerable evidence that unionized workers are better paid – and better treated in other ways as well – than non-unionized workers. Even if it were true that workers would always be better off economically by dealing individually with employers, this judgment

assumes that workers' goals are mainly economic, which in fact Friedman does not think.

Consider the possibility that workers want power and, at the cusp of the mass strike, can intuitively sense its possibility. Then it would be reasonable to think they are motivated to join the strike by the prospect of collective power that the mass strike raises, by anticipation of the sheer joy of being able at times to stand up to the bosses. Most of the time, workers like the rest of us live out the routines of their daily lives, but then there are the unusual moments when workers, tutored by their subculture in the lessons of past labor struggles and tutored also by their own understanding of the workplace, seize the chance to stop production as a way of forcing employers, and perhaps state officials as well, to the wall. And what if the prospect of exercising power, as Jack Metzgar persuasively argued in his semi-autobiographical book on the steelworkers union, is not only a way of improving wages and working conditions, but a way of gaining a measure of dignity and security?<sup>1</sup>

I think that Friedman's treatment of the power question also simplifies and distorts his view of unions. I agree that unions usually work to tamp down worker militancy as the price for collective bargaining rights. That is the bargain, but they can also work to mobilize militancy, when militancy is viewed as essential for union preservation or growth, and there are ample instances when they do that successfully. It was after all the Service Employees International Union, an organization that epitomizes Friedman's definition of a staff-led 'business union', that set in motion the Justice for Janitors campaign of the 1990s, and Friedman himself considers the Justice for Janitors campaign to exemplify labor's democratic aspirations (p. 162).

What is wrong here is the assumption that unions have little or no power, that union power has to be imported through alliances with outsiders – but is this true? Even though unions work to control strike actions, they also retain the leverage inherent in their intermittent ability to threaten to strike. They harness and curb labor power, and they also sometimes deploy labor power. Moreover, because unions are organizations with treasuries and large numbers of members, they also become electoral players. We do not have to embrace unions as the beacons of socialist salvation to recognize that unions were an important force in resisting the neoliberal assault in Europe: think of the Nordic countries and Germany – and even in the USA – and that resistance was more successful where unions were bigger and stronger.

The quandary that Friedman lays out is part of the labor movement reality. Yet no reasonable labor democrat would scorn unionism. She would know what the leaders of the striking automobile workers knew when they were offered their first Chrysler contract in 1937 at the end of the Flint sit-downs. The contract offer had been bitterly fought for and it was an historic victory, but the contract offer was on condition that the union ensure there would be no work stoppages until an extended grievance procedure has been exhausted. Shortly afterwards, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) also disavowed the sit-down, but the United Auto Workers was born, and it mattered greatly in the lives of autoworkers, and in the politics of the country, for more than half a century. Dealing with the quandary means dealing with a messy, complicated political world where more

enduring institutionalized rights are sometimes won, but at a price – until the next mass strike.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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### **Note**

1. Jack Metzger, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000).

### **Labor's dilemma**

Certainly Gerald Friedman did not imagine his readers to be so naïvely expecting him to provide solutions to 'reignite the labor movement', and restore its past flamboyance and radicalism, for none of the seven chapters of the book address this promise. Nor do the concluding pages, meant to literally approach the question, adequately do so. The formulation of the title, however, deliberately stimulates that hope. Are we (as labor historians) so romantic that we think a reversal of the catastrophic situation of labor today possible? The real subject of Friedman's book, is not labor's reemergence, nor is it an analysis of the many causes of its decline, rather, I would suggest, it is a form of obituary of a defunct movement.

More concretely, the book is a study of the history of the labor movement, whose time-span is conceived as having lasted one century, from the massive insurgencies of the 1880s to its agony since the 1980s. What renews the reflection on labor's rise and demise is that it is presented as a general and international phenomenon, common to all democratic Western countries, with specific examples drawn from the American, British, French and German contexts more particularly.

Timewise and geographically, it would be difficult not to agree with Friedman's statement.

The labor movement was a logical development stemming from the French revolution: its goal was to bring democracy and more equality to the heart of the economic system in industrializing countries. Pointedly, Friedman symbolically situates its birth when the Second Labor and Socialist International was founded, at a date, 14 July 1889, and place, Paris, chosen to commemorate the French Revolution. The institutional, geographic and ideological scope of the Second International, encompassing labor organizations as well as socialist parties, provides a concrete framework of reference for the purpose of Friedman's study, an analysis

of the success and failure of the democratic goals of the labor movement in the Western countries from the time of its self-assertion at the end of the nineteenth century until today. Even if Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), shunned the Paris meeting – and forever the Labor and Socialist International – out of mistrust for its socialist preponderance – the American origin of Mayday, in reference to the 1886 Chicago events, whose remembrance was thus commemorated in the choice of 1 May as the international labor day, was enough to include the USA's version of labor organizations in the vast democratic labor movement even if their goal, there, was not socialism.

As a kind of premise, Friedman maintains that as labor movements became institutionalized they lost their democratic essence. Becoming hierarchically structured and led by 'new men of power' they constrained workers' spontaneous urge for fraternity, and equality, forcing them into concessions rather than leading them to their ultimate socialist goals. According to Friedman, Labor's 'democratic dilemma' and loss of momentum is attributable to this inherent institutionalization, democratic frustration and loss of ideals. Opposing the 'popular labor movement' to institutionalized Labor (p. 8), Friedman contends that the latter's demise is a consequence of its thwarting the grassroots democratic impulse. In other words, Labor's weaknesses are attributable to itself rather than to exogenous forces. Conversely, moments of labor's growth stemmed from inherent working class dynamism and conquest of power. The innovative approach of Friedman's book consists in describing the transnational character of these trends rather than isolating their national dimensions. Labor history has mainly been told in national contexts so far, and rarely has the full development of the labor movement been looked at across national boundaries. In this inclusive framework, Friedman takes the reader to explore several moments of that long time span, and eventually deplors labor's universal, and apparently irreversible, decline (in the Western world). 'The labor movement has lost its spirit, its *élan*, social legitimacy, and moral status even faster than it has members', he maintains (p. 12).

The author contends that unions decline because they fail to organize workers where they are. 'The Unions' fate is not in the stars of deindustrialization but in themselves', he affirms (p. 20). Neither deindustrialization, nor a hostile legal environment as it exists in the USA for example, can fully explain such loss. Using statistical data from 16 countries, Friedman documents this downward trend whose signs had been perceptible earlier in the USA than in other Western countries, but eventually have affected them all since the end of the 1970s. One possible exception is the case of Belgium, he underlines, precisely because Belgian labor has been able to organize workers 'where they are', that is in the white collar sector (p. 20). As Friedman's own figures show it (Table 2.1), Scandinavian countries, consistently maintaining high union memberships, have also avoided this abrupt fall.

Furthermore, Friedman pursues, socialist parties have played a part in this demoralization. When in power, he maintains, they have 'gained authority to broker a reformist compromise of labor peace in exchange for improvements in wages and working-class living conditions' (p. 22), but in the long run they have lost the confidence of their classic electorates or have deviated from their initial goals for more democracy. Aggregate data for the 16 countries indicate that after reaching a peak of 40% of the electorate in the early 1970s the proportion of votes to socialist



and communist parties had declined to 35% by 1993, and down to less than a third of electorates in 2000, that is less than in the 1920s. As happened with unions, socialist politics went into decline after the 1970s. Even if the electoral and union dimension of the Left's decline are correlated factors of a general trend, the parties' responsibility is high, he insists, because when in power they 'repress popular democracy' rather than enhance it. Strikes – formerly moments of working class strength and creative solidarity – have now virtually disappeared; collective bargaining loses legitimacy for potential union members. Friedman's specific argument is that this downward spiral has reached such a point of degradation that new militancy is required to stem the ebb and restore democratic values for the people. Old parties and union structures have reached a similar stalemate situation. The merit of Friedman's transnational approach and chronology is to allow us to consider the labor movement as a historical moment, whose span of life we can now perceive. For today and the future, however, one is at a loss as to what indeed could be the expressions of the 'popular labor movement'.

A return to the past certainly provides refreshing examples of what Friedman meant by democracy. His exposition of a rich lore of labor and political history in several countries is what makes the book attractive. Across national boundaries he traces the moments, activists, ideas that broke the subordinate compliance to the capitalist order. He thus brings to the forefront a myriad of agitators, militants, or intellectuals, whose prescient visions, in their times, brought the labor movement to new shores. The progress, he maintains was not simply based on constructive organizing, however important that strategy may have been, but only moved forward by spurts, even irrational bursts of action, largely out of the control of established unions. Strike waves (1886, 1919, 1936, 1968) he says, have been key moments of union formation or new labor advances. Michèle Perrot had argued along these lines by pointing to 'la jeunesse de la grève' (the strike as a young form of action) by playing upon words 'jeunesse' and 'genèse' – youth/genesis.<sup>1</sup> As an illustration of these 'moments of magic' and youth giving rise to powerful mass insurgencies (p. 59), Friedman offers one of his most powerful vignettes, a portrait of Polish-German activist Rosa Luxemburg (pp. 61–67, 131). She rejected the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD's) reformist policy, urging its leaders to maintain the objective of revolution as the means and goal of socialism. The great threat of reformism, she criticized, was that it became an end in itself, while the 'Socialist purpose of trade union and political struggle consists in preparing the proletariat for social upheaval' (p. 64). Disenchanted by the SPD's electoral politics, she encouraged radical forms of action such as mass strikes as training grounds for revolutionary militancy. Luxemburg's tragic fate clearly illustrates how destructive the opposition between reform and revolution can be. During the Spartacist uprising in January 1919, which she supported, she was arrested and killed by the extreme right militia of the Freikorps who acted under the command of SPD Defense Minister Gustav Noske trying to establish order in the first socialist government in Germany. The tragedy of her death, along with that of Karl Liebknecht and hundreds of other German militants, made them martyrs to the cause of revolution. The repression did not prevent the birth of the German Communist Party (KPD), but it left an insurmountable legacy of hostility between the SPD's reformism and the KPD's revolutionary goals. The disastrous consequences of the impossibility of the

two parties to unite in a common front to curb the rise of the Nazi forces are only too well known.

What is less clear, with this example, is its ultimate message for the labor movement. If Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary rhetoric and action is to be exemplary of the animus and strength that labor should harbor, why did Friedman keep complete silence on other radical movements in Europe or America? The impact and fate of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA, for instance, is comparable in purpose and tactics, if not in scope, to the nascent revolutionary movement in Germany. The IWW's commitment to direct action opposed them to the AFL or to the electoral strategy of the Socialist Party of America, and triggered full-fledged repression against them by US economic, legal and political powers during World War I. Crushed by governmental repression before it could sink deeper roots in the American working class, the IWW was one of the rare organizations of labor about which critiques of bureaucracy, institutionalization and compromises could not apply. Has not its aura for American labor been similar to that of Rosa Luxemburg for German radicals, and is not its legacy traceable in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and even in some of the New Left forms of action in the 1960s?

Along the same line, one may wonder why the book totally avoids the question of communism in the shaping of many European labor movements. Friedman's aggregate figures concerning electoral results for the 16 countries concerned do include votes for labor, socialist and communist parties as indicators of the Left's progress or decline, but communism as a movement is not the object of any consideration in this book. Is this ambiguous silence equivalent to an implicit condemnation of communism because of its perversion by totalitarian régimes and anti-democratic parties throughout the world? That could be a point, but it requires some clarification, and if that were the case, what is the value of the example of Rosa Luxemburg's rhetoric on revolutionary mass action if the outcome of her passion, the founding of the German Communist Party, is not to be recognized as a legitimate form of working class organization? The Russian Revolution is only mentioned once by an allusion to Lenin as an autocratic leader who authoritatively prevented democratic self-governance in the Russian unions, but the whole Bolshevik revolution and its repercussions in the emergence of Communism as a major inspiration and component of the organizations of labor in many European countries does not appear. Similarly, communism in France, once the mainstay of a powerful movement in both its labor (*Confédération générale du travail* – CGT) and political dimensions (*Parti communiste français* – PCF), is only alluded to through the mention of one of its leaders, Maurice Thorez, described as an example of autocratic leadership curbing popular insurgency (p. 77), but nothing is said of communism as a social movement.

Another of these puzzling constructions in Friedman's book is the assertion that the Popular front movement in 1936 'failed' in France, while it was successful in the USA (pp. 73–83). Friedman recognized that there was much in common in the two countries' movements, most notably the incorporation of the working class in national politics, and spontaneous workers' protest overcoming established union discipline. Friedman's conclusion, however, that the gains of the strike wave in France did not outlast the short span of life of the Popular Front itself, while

labor's progress was more durable in the USA, is wrongly based on equating labor gains with the brevity of Leon Blum's government. Yes, the Popular Front itself, as a governmental coalition of Communist, Socialist and Radical-Socialist parties, did not resist the attacks of the right and the difficult economic conditions of the decade, let alone the tense international situation (rearmament in Germany, Civil War in Spain), but in terms of labor progress the legacy of the *Front populaire* vastly outgrew Leon Blum's short terms. It became the basis of collective negotiations, workers' pensions, paid holidays, development of public education, the 40-hour work week and formidable union progress. The CGT, having reunited its reformist and revolutionary branches, multiplied its membership five-fold and the Communist Party doubled its returns with 1.5 million votes. Labor progress does not always follow a linear path of material gains. Beyond the initial insurgency, its legacy is projected into the future as political events also intervene in social and economic relations. The second Popular Front strike wave in 1938, as well as the spontaneous networks of left wing Resistance during the war, and the strength of French labor in the post-war years, all stem from the 1936 cohesion contributing to the foundation of the post-war welfare state and collective negotiations régime.

As a form of counter-replica, if US labor growth was more straightforward from 1935 to 1945, one can easily remark its inability to resist the Republican party's attacks in 1947, with the Taft Hartley Act (not mentioned in Friedman's narrative) that definitively curbed its momentary dynamism. The 'ability of American labor unions to hold onto their gains' (p. 81) it seems to me, must be set against their compliance with the anti-communist requirements of the Cold war period, which deprived them (the CIO unions in particular) of their more radical and committed organizers. The origin of the decline in US labor's momentum, at least concerning the private sector, is to be found there and then, leaving the AFL-CIO a complacent force that, having renounced political opposition or creativity, limited its action to obtaining material benefits for its members and failed to organize new workers beyond the core industrial sector.

Does the absence of such examples mean that regardless of specific national examples, labor's destiny in all countries is similarly on the wane? I agree with the basic tenets of Friedman's argument: the history of Labor in western societies has been most dynamic in the past century, its peaks corresponded to the 'moments of madness' of massive strike waves, certainly. The decline now seems confirmed in most countries. I would argue that it is worse than what Friedman recognizes, an 8% union membership in France or 12% among workers in the USA. The only unions in the USA and in France whose memberships do not decline, or have actually grown, are those of the public sectors, that is to say workers who benefit from job security or at least are for a time shielded from international competition. In the USA, the union rate is also down to 8% in the private sector of the economy. Thus the decline is more abrupt than Friedman's presentation makes it when he combines electoral returns with union membership figures to speak of the general labor and socialist landscapes.

What is more objectionable is to place the blame for this decline only on labor institutions themselves in their tendency of obviating the democratic expression of the rank and file. Friedman dismisses economic or political causes of union decline in spite of the recent environment of globalization. In so doing he also neglects

the reasons of past mobilizations. The critical notions of mass production and industrialization are not addressed. It is no coincidence if Labor's heyday took place with the advent of industrial society that took shape in the USA and Europe since the 1880s. The movements aimed at correcting the blatant injustice of arch-liberal economies, when no counter-powers prevailed over the employers' rule. The Knights of Labor for instance aimed at establishing economic justice in the workplace, trying to impart it with the same republican principles as theoretically existed in the political arena. Mass production coming to a head between the 1920s and 1960s, labor movements caught up with the inequalities of a social order that had failed to fully incorporate the working class in the polity, but can labor movements thus founded on the rise of an industrial economy survive the numerical decline of production workers and the virtual disappearance of the industrial sector in their national contexts? Is the notion of class (working class) adapted to a service economy where the office, or the super market, rather than the factory, have become the typical workplaces of advanced economies? Can one speak of class in the same homogenizing way when public education systems accelerate social mobility in ways that reduce working class reproduction? Is the urge to correct inequalities the same today when welfare states, even if they are under attack, provide a modicum of stability to workers' lives certainly superior to the abysmal poverty and insecurity that existed in the 1880s or pre-New Deal, and pre-Popular Front, 1930s? However insufficient or precarious these welfare benefits might be, they nonetheless have come into being thanks to workers' collective action and contributed to a minimum standard of living. Many of labor's voluntary demands for more social justice have been transferred to the state – minimum wages, unemployment benefits, collective negotiations, and social insurance more generally – creating new relations between the state and civil society. A strong union movement is indispensable to maintain these benefits, but its goal therefore will be reformist rather than revolutionary inasmuch as it becomes a partner to the state in these negotiations. In addition, it is not clear what the nature of the democratic élan of revolutionary inspiration can be when, after the collapse of communism in all its economic and political structures, economic alternatives to capitalism sound implausible, but, at the same time, socialism has also been dissolved into varying degrees of economic and social liberalism?

Friedman's vast panorama of Labor's past struggles, gains and present losses helps us ponder about the difficulty of overcoming the present situation in order to avoid a return to the arbitrariness of employer rule and individualism in this neo-liberal capitalist order, but his book does not provide an analysis of the reasons why union formation is more difficult nowadays. In some countries (the USA notably), labor law has been severely deprived of its original contents and cannot perform its function. Political reactions to the New Deal order, employers' outright attacks on unions and their members, are other aggravating factors. In all Western countries, whose national economies were once protected, international competition, de-localizations, the major transfer of the manufacturing sector to China and other emerging countries, cannot be underestimated as factors of deep social and economic changes. My contention is that one cannot isolate labor's own deficiencies (lack of internal democracy) as the only difficulty that must be overcome in the completely new social and economic order of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Friedman's argument is most convincing, when he analyzes the situation of the British Labor Party during the 1970s economic crisis produced by the first oil shocks and worldwide stagflation (pp. 136–152). Explaining that Prime Minister Callaghan's government failed as a Labor government because it could not satisfy both the workers' demands for better wages and capital interests at the same time, he concludes to the 'fundamental fallacy of reform . . . within the existing structures of capitalism' or to the inherent irony of labor movements which contain the seeds of their eventual decline in acquiescing to labor peace. The situation was not different in France, one may rejoin, during François Mitterrand's first term. It is the ultimate compromise between the state and unions' demands for a fairer share of the economic gains that according to Friedman, in all countries, is the source of Labor's final loss of credibility and strength. So the reader remains wondering where the real resources of labor organization could stem from. Ideological and economic alternatives do not abound in this post-industrial and post-socialist Western part of the world.

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#### **Notes on contributor**

Catherine Collomp is a Professor of American history at Université Paris-Diderot, France. She has done research in American labor and immigration history and is now focusing on the role of the Jewish Labor Committee in the rescue of political refugees from Nazi and fascist European countries during the 1930s and 1940s. Her books include *Entre classe et nation, Immigration et mouvement ouvrier aux Etats-Unis, 1880–1920* (Paris: Belin, 1998); *Exilés et réfugiés politiques aux Etats Unis, 1789–2000* (Paris: CNRS-Éditions, 2003); *An American in Hitler's Berlin: Abraham Plotkin's Diary, 1932–1933* (edited with Bruno Groppo) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Email: catherine.collomp@orange.fr

#### **Note**

1. Michelle Perrot, *Jeunesse de la grève, France, 1871–1890* (Paris, 1984).

#### **The democratic renewal of French trade unionism: an impossible challenge?**

This article is less of a review of the above work than an analysis and discussion of some of its key arguments. Friedman's book has two salient characteristics. First, the author has chosen not to restrict himself to a purely comparative approach to trade union decline: instead of examining the contrasting ways in which this phenomenon has played out in a number of countries, he treats it as a transnational occurrence which transcends national contexts. Second, in his critical approach the importance of a number of factors traditionally identified as explaining the decline of trade unions in the major capitalist countries – changes in working practices, the state of labor law in the case of the USA, and divisions in the French labor movement – is downplayed. According to Friedman, the principal reason for union decline is the unions' inability to act collectively to formulate and implement a strategic plan for reform and social transformation. Friedman links this failure to the

fact that unions are cut off from the workforce and grassroots activists, leading them to neglect what should be their main mission, which is to enable workers to voice their opinions, and foster authentic democracy in the workplace and in mass action. For Friedman, any future trade union revival will require the trade union movement to go back to its roots and broaden democratic participation. The author's approach is suggestive and often persuasive – encompassing an analysis of strikes, collective action and reforms within companies and placing the notion of 'union democracy' at the centre of his analysis, while putting less emphasis on economic, juridical or material factors. Nevertheless, when applied to the French context – which Friedman knows well – his analysis invites discussion of the feasibility of the kinds of authentic trade union democracy he advocates, which would be centred on the workers and grass roots activists.

### **1. A review of the situation in France**

In our discussion of these points we will focus on two phenomena mentioned in Friedman's essay: divisions within the French trade union movement, and the transformations in the world of work linked to the consistently high levels of unemployment in France since the mid 1970s. Friedman is certainly right when he claims that the crisis in French trade unionism cannot be exclusively attributed to these two factors. Throughout its history the French trade union movement has been marked by divisions. These divisions did not, however, prevent French trade unions from organizing major strike campaigns – in 1936, 1968 and 1995 – and influencing a number of important reforms, including reform of the social security system, the post-war nationalization programme, and the establishment of collective bargaining procedures. In fact, many pieces of employment legislation have provoked demands from trade unions and led to subsequent industrial action. Furthermore, if the transformation of the workplace and working conditions which resulted from high levels of unemployment is of such central importance, how can we account for the fact that the decline in trade unionism affects not only private but also public sector organisations – such as teaching, postal worker and civil service unions – who represent employees whose status is protected, and who are guaranteed of having a job for life?

Nevertheless, while divisions in the trade union movement and the reorganization of the workplace and working conditions cannot fully account for the decline in French trade unionism, the fact remains that these factors both constitute authentic obstacles to the development of trade union democracy and hence to a revival in the fortunes of the trade union movement.

### **2. Democracy or divided unions? Membership and employee voting**

For trade union democracy to be restored a number of pre-conditions must be fulfilled, two of which are of particular importance: first, the participation of employees in professional elections and, second, workers' membership of trade unions. Recent empirical research has revealed that these conditions, which are essential democratic conditions – voting is the most basic democratic act and joining a union enables a worker to voice their opinions and have an influence on trade union policy – are both gravely undermined by divisions within the trade union movement.



As regards worker participation in elections, a clear pattern emerges: the more trade unions appear to be divided, the fewer employees bother to vote. In the latest nationwide *prud'homme* elections in December 2008 the rate of abstention was 75%.<sup>1</sup> In this type of election the divisions between unions are particularly apparent. Employees were certainly given a wide choice: seven trade union organizations put forward candidates. Over the last 30 years, participation levels in *prud'homme* elections have steadily declined and today are at an all time low. If we consider the situation at a local level, the picture is rather different. In many companies, particularly those operating in the private sector, the union movement seems less divided. Except in large firms, there are generally only one, two or at the most three unions to choose from, each affiliated with one of the major national confederations, the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) and the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) being the most well established. At the local level professional elections, including the election of employee representatives on works councils,<sup>2</sup> the rate of participation is around 60%, indicating an abstention rate of approximately 40%. Although this rate of abstention is certainly high, it is still considerably lower than for elections, such as the *prud'homme* elections, where internal division with the trade union movement is more apparent.

While voting rates at the local level may give some cause for satisfaction, the same cannot be said for the another touchstone for the health of union democracy, namely the rates of union membership. Voters in elections within companies are rarely members of a trade union. France has the lowest levels of trade union membership of any European Union (EU) country: only 7% of French workers are unionized. Once again, this low figure seems to be connected to the segmentation and divisions within the trade union movement. Numerous opinion polls confirm that one of the main reasons behind the failure of the many French people to join a union is the lack of unity in the French trade union movement.

Therefore any revival of a kind of trade unionism which is more in touch with both the world of the work and the grassroots membership, as well as rooted in more democratic practices would face three major obstacles: a fragmented trade union movement, high rates of abstention in workplace elections and low levels of trade union membership. To this trio of problems needs to be added the fact that in France the categories of individual who are most at risk of unemployment, most likely to find themselves in work which offers low job security, and most vulnerable in a context of capitalist competition – young people, women, the working class, immigrants – are by far the least likely to be unionized. Compared to other categories of worker, such as civil servants, the above-mentioned groups are of marginal importance to trade unions. Gerald Friedman puts a discussion of trade union democracy at the centre of his book. We can legitimately wonder how meaningful such a discussion can be at a time and in a place where the very people who are most in need of trade unions are the least likely to join them.

### **3. Trade union 'elites' cut off from the workers?**

The estrangement of the workforce from the trade unions is also linked to the transformation of industrial relations since the economic crisis of the 1970s. Increases in unemployment levels and changes in the world of work and systems of

production have completely transformed the role of trade unions. While Friedman is undoubtedly right to stress the importance of struggle and strikes in the development and practice of trade unionism, particularly when he writes: 'the strike precedes the union', we must not overlook the fact that most struggles are the prelude to negotiations, and that the conduct of negotiations is just as much a part of the work of a union as struggle and social protest. Or, to put it another way, it can be said that trade unions contribute to the creation of what the Webbs and Commons call 'common rules' and that these rules – which were introduced to reduce the imbalance in the relationship between employers and employees and guarantee employees certain individual and collective protections – resulted from negotiations.<sup>3</sup>

Questions about the future of trade unionism and trade union democracy can be approached by first looking at the form negotiations take. Indeed trade unions' negotiating role has experienced a major transformation. In the Fordian system, during the *Trente Glorieuses*, most of the struggles and negotiations undertaken by trade unions were over salaries and had purely redistributive aims. It is in this context that a number of sociologists have referred to the salary as a 'general protest equivalent' and that several French economists (Aglietta, Boyer, Coriat, Lipietz in particular) have defined the notion of salary ratio as a form of capitalist and Fordian regulation.<sup>4</sup>

With the economic crisis of the 1970s, the rise in unemployment levels and the deep transformations of systems of production and the working world, the role of unions and the aims of collective bargaining in companies and various employment sectors also underwent major changes. In France, as in other countries, a preoccupation with the protection and preservation of jobs had a great deal of impact on relations between employers and employees. Regarding collective bargaining, the formerly dominant approach – a Fordian search for a compromise over salary which took work performance into consideration – has been replaced by an increasing concern with productive efficiency aimed at consolidating the company's competitiveness, which aims to protect and create jobs. In terms of contractual legitimacy, the salary paradigm has made way for a newly hegemonic paradigm, namely the productivity paradigm.<sup>5</sup> The moral basis of this paradigm – 'the efficiency of the company provides a degree of job security and protects employees from the intolerable prospect of being made redundant' – provides a rationale for negotiation strategies which prioritize productivity. In this context, the role of trade unions has ceased to be solely centred on conflict and power struggles, and negotiations no longer revolve around wage claims. As a result of the dominance of the productivity paradigm in collective bargaining, trade unions are increasingly obliged to involve themselves in a wide variety of technical and management questions such as flexibility, skills management, employability, the versatility of work organizations, re-training and professional training policy. The employer's objective is to obtain something in return for the losses incurred in the satisfaction of their employees' demands. As for the unions – be they reformist such as the CFDT, or more militant, like the CGT – their roles and orientations have changed. Trade unions are now involved in negotiations of issues which have a great deal of technical and management-related content, with the result that trade unionism is increasingly becoming a domain for experts. Trade unionism is no longer



a movement centred on struggle referred to as ‘trade unionism of the masses’ by some trade unionists. Nowadays, for trade unionists to succeed in influencing change within companies and so safeguard their members’ jobs the acquisition of expertise is increasingly indispensable.

Of course, the requirement of trade unions to operate in increasingly technical contexts is nothing new, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, and was mentioned by industrial relations theorists as early as the 1950s. John Dunlop, in his book *Industrial Relations Systems*,<sup>6</sup> discusses this phenomenon at some length in relation to US industrial relations. The increasingly technical nature of trade unionism has resulted in a rising degree of professionalization of trade unionists. In France, where union involvement in ever more technically complex situations is a much more recent phenomenon, the process of professionalization of trade unionists now manifests itself very clearly. French trade unionists – many of whom now have highly specialized and sophisticated skills and expertise – typically find themselves deeply absorbed in the preparation and conduct of negotiations, and heavily involved in the application, monitoring and evaluation of ever more technically complex agreements. These responsibilities take union officials away from ordinary workers and work collectives, leading them to lose touch with the grass roots.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Protection of jobs vs democracy?**

In French social history representative trade unionism has on occasion been contrasted with opposed to trade union democracy. In the 1950s Benoît Frachon, then leader of the CGT, denounced ‘trade union flunkies’. With the way capitalism and the job market have evolved, and work and productive systems have been re-organised, representative trade unionism seems to be the ever more dominant model.<sup>8</sup>

As a consequence, can it be said that we are witnessing the development of a ‘union technostucture’, responsible for the management of workers’ demands but increasingly cut off from the workers themselves? Could it even be suggested that the relationship between union ‘elites’ and ordinary employees involves certain kinds of symbolic and cognitive domination which have been observed in other institutions? Such alternative interpretations are at odds with the traditional image of French unions – centred around protest, strike action, and street demonstrations – an image which many trade unionists are at pains to cultivate and perpetuate both in their contacts with rank-and-file workers and when participating in surveys.<sup>9</sup> Some might say that there is a striking contrast between trade unionists’ radical discourse and the way they actually conduct themselves, which would arguably constitute a case of schizophrenia. This is a rather different problem which is beyond the scope of this essay.

Friedman is undoubtedly correct to reject an approach which, in an attempt to explain the decline of the trade unions, focuses too closely on economic matters, stressing such factors as the restructuring of the working world and the job market. Nevertheless, it is equally true that the evolution of employment and the development of new ways of organizing work have brought about major changes in the role of unions, as well as leading to the emergence of an elite within trade unions, an elite whose status has not explicitly been conferred, but is no less real for

all that. It is also undoubtedly the case that the existence of such elites within trade unions constitutes a significant obstacle to the emergence of a more democratic, grass roots trade unionism of the kind Friedman advocates. This phenomenon is not confined to France and is particularly widespread in the countries of Northern Europe. The model of the full-time trade unionist – which dates from the beginning of the last century and has often been considered as an important element in an ideal blueprint for trade union democracy – is, in the current economic context, confronted with a serious contradiction. The very skills and expertise which trade unions rely on to save as many jobs as possible, themselves constitute a barrier to a democratic renewal of trade unionism.

The current situation may therefore be summed up by the following paradox: although today both trade union democracy and the struggle to protect jobs are still core principles and key goals of the trade union movement, they are not always mutually compatible and can even find themselves pulling in opposite directions. It has often been observed that in many countries political and representative democracy are faced with ever more contradictions, as societies become more complex and changeable.<sup>10</sup> Trade union democracy is certainly no exception to this trend.

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### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. At the *prud'homme* elections employees vote to select the trade union representatives who sit on work tribunals. These tribunals have jurisdiction to hear disputes between employers and employees.
2. French works councils (*Comités d'entreprise*) are made up of a firm's management and elected representatives of the workforce. The works council is consulted on economic matters, company policy regarding training, and expert reports regarding the introduction of new technology and the financial state of the company. Works councils are also required to approve and supervise mass redundancy plans.
3. See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965) (originally published 1897).
4. For the notion of salaries as 'general protest equivalent', cf. Sabine Erbès-Seguín, *Syndicats et relations de travail dans la vie économique française* (Lille: Presses universitaires de Lille, 1985). For the Regulation school, see Michel Aglietta, *Régulation et crises du capitalisme: l'expérience des Etats-Unis* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1982); Robert Boyer, 'Rapport salarial, croissance et crise; une dialectique cachée. Introduction à une comparaison de sept pays européens', in Robert Boyer (Ed.) *La flexibilité du travail en Europe* (Paris, La Découverte, 1986).

5. Jacques Bélanger and Christian Thuderoz, 'La recodification de la relation d'emploi', *Revue française de sociologie*, 39, no. 3 (1998). On the effects of the recodification of employment and the transformation of work on strike movements in France and Europe, see also: Guy Groux and Jean-Marie Pernot, *La Grève* (Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008).
6. John T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 1993) [originally published 1958]. For a collection of essays on Dunlop's ideas including contributions from Colin Crouch, David Madsen, Michael Piore, Alain Touraine and Jonathan Zeitlin, see Jean-Daniel Reynaud, François Eyraud, Catherine Paradeise and Jean Saglio, eds., *Les systèmes de relations professionnelles. Examen critique d'une théorie* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1990).
7. In a recent survey which confirmed the findings of many previous polls, employees were asked to specify the most effective course to be taken in a situation where employee rights needed defending. Seeking the help of a trade union was the least preferred option. For 50% of employees questioned the best course of action would be for the individual employee to take the matter up directly with their superiors; a further 25% believed that discussing the problem with other employees who were in broadly the same position would be the best step to take. Only 23% of survey participants considered that the best course of action would be to consult a representative of a trade union. TNS-Sofrès survey: 'Dialogue social: une nouvelle donne pour la France?', May 2008. For an example of an analysis of relations between union activists and rank-and-file employees, see the recent CEVIPOF survey conducted by Martine Barthélémy, Claude Dargent, Nadia Hilal and Henri Rey, *La CFDT aujourd'hui. Pratiques militantes et rapport au politique* (Paris: CEVIPOF/CNRS, Sciences Po, December 2008), pp. 103–104.
8. Following the economic and financial crisis of 2008, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the processes involving the re-organization of work and productive systems will continue.
9. The European Social Survey (ESS), for example.
10. See Pascal Perrineau, ed., *Le désenchantement démocratique* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2003); Pierre Rosanvallon, *La contre-démocratie: la politique à l'âge de la défiance* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

### **What does a labor-union leadership do when it leads?**

Gerald Friedman has set for himself a remarkably ambitious task, one worthy of the efforts of a talented scholar such as Friedman, an economist who is equally at home with history and sociology. His book on *State Making and Labor Movements* remains a classic in the field.<sup>1</sup>

Friedman's study is an indictment of modern European and American trade unionism and its practices. He argues that contemporary trade unionism has reached a dead end for lack of attention to democratic demands and procedures. Much evidence supports his argument about union decline. In the advanced industrial nations, the proportion of the working population belonging to trade unions or engaging in strikes has generally declined over the last twenty years. Since 1980 labor's share of the vote had decreased in most European nations. According to Friedman 'the great strike wave of the 1970s marks the end of an era . . . the United States with its "exceptionally" weak Labor Movement now appears as a forerunner of future trends' (p. 29).

What's going on? Friedman's argument goes straight back to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century debates among socialists about reform versus revolution and spontaneity versus organization. Basically he argues that reformism and

organization are the problems and revolution and spontaneity are the solutions. Friedman favors decentralized democratic unions as providing the environment that might best promote mass protest and the strike waves that can lead to economic democracy (p. 131).

Strikes play a large role in Friedman's analysis of labor militancy and contemporary unions play a minor, almost invariably negative, role. Unions occupy a highly contradictory position. 'Unions expand through the unrest that they then pacify; they pacify the unrest that fuels their growth' (p. 73). The future for modern-day European and American trade unionism or for any other established labor institution is grim. In the end 'the pacification of popular militancy and the settlement of disputes through top-level and bureaucratic negotiation can lessen the need to tolerate unions; on the other hand, continued popular militancy also lessens the reason to tolerate unions because they have failed in their promise to restrain unrest' (p. 72). Whether they succeed or fail in curbing labor militancy, trade unions cannot long enjoy power.

If the strike is Friedman's main measure of labor activism, then the strike wave is his preferred gauge of readiness for revolution. Strike waves are unpredictable eruptions that disrupt routine labor relations, assert democratic values, and recruit new members to the labor movement. While unions play no role in producing strike waves, strike waves build unions. Union recruitment has typically been stimulated by strike waves and the historic growth of unions has come mainly in the wake of strike activity. Friedman devotes relatively little space to analyzing what strategies unions should pursue to promote militancy. Friedman poses the problem whether trade union leaderships, however progressive, contribute anything to worker militancy? His clear message is that unions leadership should mainly be prepared to get out of the workers' way.

OK. Trade unions get out of the workers' way. What then?

Friedman is deeply critical of established trade union practices, but he does not offer much in the way of concrete alternatives. Does democratic, spontaneist unionism represent a viable alternative to existing approaches to social protest?

Strategy and tactics have been a perennial problem for advocates of decentralized, spontaneist politics. In the second half of the twentieth century, the search for decentralized spontaneist tactics that could produce a workers' democracy can be found in France in the wake of the great May–June strike of 1968, itself a spontaneist strike action. In the 1970s the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*), a union that had gained a reputation for participatory politics during May–June, espoused spontaneist struggles for worker self management, *autogestion*, and this idea briefly dominated French trade-union thought. *Autogestion* would seem an important example of the kind of democratic participation at work for which Friedman calls.

Self management captured the imagination of many French unionists but it proved difficult to translate into practical politics; finally the search reached a dead end. By far the best known *autogestionnaire* tactic was the factory takeover, one factory takeover in particular. Starting in 1973, a strike turned into a factory occupation, turned into a worker seizure of the enterprise. Workers took control of the bankrupt LIP watchworks factory and, during the 1970s LIP workers, aided by the French left, struggled to maintain a worker-run company in capitalist

France. Many in France cheered the workers' efforts but finally the government of conservative Valéry Giscard d'Estaing exerted pressure to pull the financial plug on LIP.

Whatever else it was the LIP case did not provide a model for routine left politics. The few attempts to imitate LIP foundered. The single LIP plant had absorbed the energies of the French left for much of the mid 1970s.

How would democratic trade unionists organized at the local level respond to authoritarian government? Its strong community orientation, poorly positioned decentralized unionism to address national political issues. Friedman tells us that a 'reignited labor movement will reach outside the workplace to mobilize workers and other community members around the idea of democracy and equality' but not how they will do so. He mentions 'models for this type of organization like the Knights of Labor, the *Bourses du travail*, the Social Democratic Federation and the continental socialist movements' but does not elaborate on what makes them worthy of imitation or identify characteristic mechanisms within these organizations that might make them especially amenable to spreading the democratic socialist ideal (p. 162). The failure to develop these models is, for me, one of the most frustrating aspects of the study. Friedman misses an opportunity to discuss whether a specific set of democratic trade union tactics can be found in the practice of such organizations. The loss is all the greater because there are few scholars who know more than Friedman about the Knights of Labor and the *Bourses du travail*, those labor exchanges subsidized by the state but administered by local unions.

In this regard, Friedman's claim that 'continental socialist movements' might serve as models for decentralized spontaneist unions is confusing. 'Continental socialist movements' covers quite a lot of terrain and includes many differently structured movements, but the beginning of Friedman's present study denounces continental socialist movements for complicity with trade unions in pacifying workers' struggles. Condemned as ossified bureaucrats, European socialists are suddenly greeted as saviors in this frustrating passage.

I briefly return to France because I believe the current situation poses serious problems for defenders of decentralized spontaneist approaches to democratic advance.

While the LIP experiment captured the attention of the French left, other problems arose. During the 1970s anti-migrant sentiments began to take front and center. The economic recession that followed the oil embargo of 1973 ended the 'thirty glorious years' of prosperity that had followed World War II in Western Europe. Faced for almost the first time with sustained unemployment, many French people began to resent migrants, even though many 'migrants' were second generation migrants who were born in France, even though many migrants had supplied labor for the hardest and most demanding jobs during the decades of labor scarcity. Right wing-politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen emerged in these years.

It is easy to say that the root of the problem was the failure of French trade union leaders to bite the bullet and undertake the task of educating their members. I believe that this is true. Nonetheless it's hard to imagine how decentralized spontaneist organizations would approach the problem of overcoming popular prejudice.

To combat popular prejudice leadership is required. Progressive French trade unionists are going to have to behave proactively and reach out to different communities. French unions have a long tradition of championing social equality and there is much to build on here even though some leftists have taken anti-migrant positions and anti-migrant sentiments are high in some working-class areas. Militant trade unionists are going to have to begin the reeducation of their constituents. To do so they will have to go beyond their rootedness in a particular community and address a variety of communities.

Educating their community about other communities is part of the role of progressive leadership.

Given the difficulty of deriving concrete tactics from a democratic spontaneist position, it may be worth reconsidering the value of 'immediate gains' even if 'higher wages, shorter hours, even controls over hiring and firing' are too often used to install 'a new set of tyrants who assume power in the name of a passive, voiceless "people"' (p. 7).

Certainly many unemployed in the French suburbs would benefit from access to wage earning. These immediate gains may bring only pocket money but they may also provide long-run dignity and entry into the larger society of French workers. The unemployed must find a place within French unionism. Migrants and the sons of migrants must get access to skills that will enable them to participate fully as equals in French society.

Today the task of integrating young migrant workers into the French polity is the foremost task of the left; it cannot be accomplished by trade unions alone. It requires a political program and left-wing parties willing to carry it out. This underlines a key weakness of Friedman's argument, his failure to deal in any great detail with political democracy. Friedman discusses the Popular Front, and the New Deal and Harold Wilson's troubled second term but mainly from a trade-union perspective. Despite his conviction that economic and political democracy are intertwined, political democracy never really has its day in Friedman's work. A look at the political side of strike waves suggests how specific they were to time and place; they were not random events but responses to specific historical circumstances.

Friedman presents a theory of mass strike activity but devotes relatively little attention to the most important element of mass strikes, their political character. The strikes of June 1936 cannot be separated from the accession of the Popular Front to power; the strikes came in the wake of left political victory. Still more crucial, the strikes of June 1936 cannot be separated from the struggle against fascism. These strikes were part of an ongoing response to the fascist mobilization of February 1934.

Similarly the strikes of May–June 1968 cannot be separated from the crisis of the Gaullist regime. General De Gaulle's semi-authoritarian regime, was installed in 1958 in response to a rightist *coup d'état* by diehard opponents of Algerian independence. His regime became less and less necessary as the right wing ultras, organized in the OAS (*Organisation de l'Armée Secrète*), were crushed and vanished from the political scene.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Italian strike wave of 1968–1969 was a key moment in the integration of southern worker migrants into the Italian political order. During the 1950s and 1960s migrants from southern Italy moved north to take jobs in



expanding industry. Hoping to take advantage of southern migrants inexperience, northern Italian employers sought to replicate the authoritarian regime of the south in the north. The strike waves that swept Italy in the 1960s were partly influenced by student radicals who spoke a Marxist political language familiar to established unions and political parties but new to many southern workers. In time these student radicals helped to elaborate a common discourse and protest repertoire among the working classes. Students played an important role in Italian class formation but they did so by helping to bring together diverse groups of workers around common demands.<sup>3</sup>

The political context of strike waves is of fundamental importance in understanding strike waves. In France and Italy strike waves have demonstrated class consciousness but they have also encouraged class formation. At times Friedman suggests that if only bureaucratic trade unionists would leave workers alone mass strikes of class conscious workers would emerge. Such a view is seriously mistaken. Class identification represents only one among many choices that workers may select. In France and Italy, mass strikes occurred in an environment of class antagonism and class-based institutions. Politics had a strongly class character and, in these contexts, it was likely that workers would see the strike as their natural weapon.

One of the tragedies of the French and Italian left in the modern era has been their inadequate exploitation of the new political opportunities created by mass strike activity. Friedman's critique of socialist and communist parties' response to strike militancy is justified. A foremost task of advocates of spontaneist unionism should be to make political parties, not only trade unions, more responsive to mass pressure. Perhaps one of the reasons for Friedman's failure to deal equally with political democracy, and not just economic democracy, is the problem that surrounds political action in the contemporary era and particularly in the era of transnational politics.

The problem of negotiating a transnational politics, a politics between or among national polities, seems particularly challenging to Friedman who advocates a decentralized, spontaneism whose emphasis is so strongly within communities. Under any circumstances these unions face serious difficulties in exerting national influence, but how will they exert influence at transnational levels?

For most of the twentieth century, socialist and communists boldly proclaimed their internationalism but pragmatically worked to reform individual states. Today all this is changing. If Europe's economic problems are too large to be handled at the level of mere consolidated states, they are too large to be handled at the level of Friedman's locally based radical communities? This crisis of the democratic state is perhaps the most serious problem confronting modern-day labor. Faced with the threat of both Europeanization and globalization, European labor movements are beginning to seek ways to exert influence on transnational and international arenas. Most of these initiatives are halting and partial but they still represent beginning steps to deal with problems that can no longer be solved at the national level.

Negotiating across communities is part of the role of progressive union leaderships.

At every higher level of union activity, at the transnational level and at the international level, there are signs that new winds are blowing in international

labor organizations. These new winds foretell trouble for Friedman's community-based unionism at home in its own local community but not in Brussels or Geneva. New winds can be felt in the merger of the old Cold War International Federation of Free Trade Unions (IFFTU) and the once Christian Democratic World Confederation of Labor (WCL) into the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The collapse of Communism, first in Eastern Europe in 1989 and then the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 has created new opportunities of restoring unity within the international labor movement. The old Communist labor federation in France, the CGT, still a major French trade union has joined ITUC which is now by far the largest world trade union federation. The presence of European trade unionists at meetings of the World Social Forum (WSM), an international organization devoted to developing alternatives to capitalist globalization, and European union support for the WSM are heartening.

In many areas progressive unionists are seeking to mount transnational action. The realignment of unions within the ITUC has also stimulated the International Trade Union Secretariats which have shown signs of renewed militancy. Over the last decade, these federations of unions in the same industry have been pioneers of labor action. The 2001–2003 trade union struggle in many European ports is only the latest in a long history of struggle by the International Transportation Federation.<sup>4</sup> The solidarity of European workers with American workers in the UPS strike of 1997 helped to revive intercontinental feelings of labor solidarity.

At the European level there has also been renewed activity and here too Friedman needs to tell us how decentralized unions will take advantage of these new forums. The European Trade Union Council (ETUC), founded in 1973, as the regional federation of the ITUC, has expanded its bargaining role in European social legislation. The ETUC quickly evolved into a broader and more comprehensive organization than its parent, welcoming Christian and Communist unions alike.

Even in the electoral arena there have been changes promoting European labor solidarity and encouraging the establishment of uniform labor laws and welfare benefits throughout the EU. Such a collective approach would avoid the dangers of small nations being forced to make concessions in order to attract investment, an approach that can lead to a drive to the bottom. Interesting in this regard is the foundation of the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 1992. Although controlled by national parties, the PES represents an effort to develop a common socialist policy and eventually to create a European-wide socialist party.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, let me applaud Gerald Friedman's efforts to discuss problems of immediate political relevance. He addresses fundamental questions of interest to everyone concerned about modern left-wing politics. If his work advances his cause, it also reveals how much work remains to be done. Friedman's efforts to delineate a strategy and tactics for a decentralized, democratic spontaneist unionism are tantalizing but vague. Perhaps this is the nature of spontaneism? Workers will develop new tactics and strategy on the spot, but can we really take these developments on faith?

At the same time we must appreciate the advantages of progressive union leadership that will not only reflect community will but educate communities and bring diverse communities together. At its best this is what progressive trade union leadership can accomplish.



Decentralized, spontaneist movements seem inadequate to address the most pressing problems of modern trade unionism in advanced industrial countries, the problems of globalization and Europeanization. A turn towards the local and the community seems to go in a wrong direction, when so many of unionism's problems stem from the transnational and the global.

In any case, Friedman has posed some key questions and I expect that he has begun a discussion that will be ongoing.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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### **Notes**

1. Gerald Friedman, *Statemaking and Labor Movements: France and the United States, 1876–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).
2. A. Dansette, *Mai 1968* (Paris: Plon, 1972).
3. See Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy 1965–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Roberto Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
4. Peter Turnbull, 'Dockworkers versus the Directives Battling Port Policy on the European Waterfront', in *Global Unions: Changing Transnational Capital through Cross Border Campaigns*, ed. Kate Bronfenbrenner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 117–36.
5. Simon Lightfoot, *Europeanizing Social Democracy: The Rise of the Party of European Socialists* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

### **What would a reignited labor movement look like?**

I feel quite honored at the constructive and thoughtful critiques that these four scholars have presented of *Reigniting the Labor Movement*. Indeed, we share a great deal including some problems with the work, and even our disagreements provide useful areas for further research and debate.

To begin with the central issue: unions grew for a century, and the labor movement transformed capitalism. Then, about 30 years ago, union membership began to decline and the labor movement lost its social *élan*. Today, workers are no longer at the cutting edge of social change and democracy. Instead, the labor movement, unions and socialist political movements, is an *old* left, rigid, narrow-minded, irrelevant to a world that has moved on.

The four accept much that I have surmised about the origins of union growth during the *Cent Glorieuses*. Unions grew by enrolling strikers during and after mass strikes because employers and state officials accepted unions as a way to pacify

unrest and to bring unruly strikers back to work. Mass strikes were the ‘collective effervescence’ of the labor movement, ‘moments of madness’ that drove union growth when employers and state officials sought *interlocuteur valubles*, union leaders who would negotiate a return to work. Moving from strife to collective bargaining, unions formed an alliance with employers and state officials in promoting social reform and orderly labor relations.

This strategy did improve the material *and* social quality of life. I say too little about this in *Reigniting*. Unions and twentieth century social democracy did more than quell unrest. They brought higher wages, shorter workweeks, paid vacations, retirements. It was not democracy, not a revolutionary transformation of power, but by restraining management autocracy, social democracy gave workers power to regulate work lives and the dignity that comes from being able to say ‘no’.

I should have said more in *Reigniting* to recognize the labor movement’s achievements over the past century, to acknowledge how workers did come to exercise some real power within capitalism. Instead, I took this for granted in a book whose main concern was that these gains are being eroded with the decline of the labor movement and the democratic spirit that it has engendered. In this sense, as Catherine Collomp notes, rather than a study of the movement’s achievements, *Reigniting* is ‘a form of obituary’.

My obituary reviews Labor’s history to understand how unions grew in the past and to identify why growth stopped and was reversed. As such, it does not neglect workers’ power; but, on the contrary, I show how workers *in the past* were able to force concessions from employers and state officials. Mass strikes were important both because of their effect on workers and because of their impact on employers and state officials. To workers, mass strikes provided a living example of worker independence and power. Striking workers presented to the rest of the working class and to others labor’s democratic face: an alternative political economy, focused on labor as a source of value, and an alternative governance, where common people seized a voice in regulating public affairs. Swept up in the excitement of strike waves, new groups of workers joined a movement that gave a clear example of worker power and popular empowerment. As much as the disruption that came from of strikes, this alternative visions of a transformed society frightened employers and state officials. Here again, *Reigniting* unfortunately understates the positive contribution of the old labor movement. In the book, I emphasize the persistence of popular discontent and the failure of unions to restrain rank-and-file militancy leading to the wildcat strike wave of the 1970s. Discounting the positive role of unions on labor militancy, I made a mistake in *Reigniting* by accepting uncritically the views of industrial relations ‘experts’ and other advocates of labor peace through collective bargaining. Instead, the role of unions under the labor accord is always contested. Some unions did demobilize the working class, discourage action and undermine any sense of alternative possibilities; but others became little islands of popular democracy where workers used the process of collective bargaining to develop the skills and confidence for self-government. After the drama of strike waves and ‘moments of madness’, came Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ where some unions contented themselves with restoring order but others used the bargaining process, grievances, and the institutions of shop stewards and union agents to promote an alternative, working-class political economy and to build democracy.

I was wrong to discount the revolutionary potential of unions. Ultimately the place of unions in a polity is not fixed; it does not depend on economic structures but reflects political choice. This is a lesson in social theory that I tried to make in other contexts throughout *Reigniting*, as well as in my earlier *State-Making and Labor Movements*; I regret that I let it slip here.

I had a negative agenda in *Reigniting*. I wanted to bury any lingering hopes that we could ignore the current crisis in the labor movement or that unions would bounce back from this latest downturn as they had from some earlier ones. I wanted to bury the type of American Exceptionalism that says that America's union problems are due to our exceptionally nasty employers and labor law and that everything will get better if we only pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). I wanted to discount a common materialism that says that the labor movement was a movement of industrial workers and its time has passed along with the industrial working class. Instead, the labor movement came from the larger democratic struggles of the French and American revolutions, and its decline reflects some loss of that democratic vision of equality and participation. Labor's decline reflects the rise of a new capitalist social order, a neo-liberal regime where global market competition is used to discipline workers without regard for laws or democratic regulation. The neoliberals' success, the triumph of the capitalist political economy of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan over Harold Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, was not determined by technology or economic conditions. What drove the rise and fall of the union movement was the readiness of the workers to struggle and the reaction of the other social actors.

As some noted, for a book entitled *Reigniting the Labor Movement*, I say little about what might be done to revive Labor. To make this omission even more glaring, I emphatically reject any suggestion that we do not need a strong labor movement. By struggling against oppression in the market and in commodity production, Labor plays a role that cannot be replaced by any variety of other social movements organized to fight other forms of political mischief or oppression.

So what would a reignited labor movement look like? I could not imagine spelling out a detailed program like the Communists' 21 points. Nonetheless, my central idea in *Reigniting* is that if Labor is to have a future, if our society is to have a humane future, then the labor movement must return to its original democratic ideal that all should share in society's bounty and participate equally in governance. To have power, to deserve power and to win necessary allies, the labor movement must focus on advancing *democratic* rather than material values.

A powerful labor movement must be democratic because above all it depends on the willingness of common workers to sacrifice and the talents and creativity of the rank-and-file. In his discussions of French workplace elections, Groux confirms that a great many workers have lost any confidence in the old established labor movement institutions. In France, where barely 7% of workers belong to unions, there has also been steady erosion in worker participation in professional elections. In *prud'hommes* elections to choose worker representatives on grievance tribunals, barely 25% of French workers vote. Such absenteeism says that workers do not feel any sense that they can control their destiny through these institutions; instead, they see them as largely meaningless façades masking the real power exercised by others, employers, state officials and perhaps union leaders.

We could conclude from data like these that popular apathy has overwhelmed popular democracy. Without popular participation, our only recourse is to look towards benign and paternalistic elites to soften the edges of capitalism. We would balance the Harvard Business School graduates with Fabians trained at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. This has been the course chosen by much of the US union movement. Abandoning local union democracy or attempts to organize through popular action, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), for example, has abandoned the successful model of its Justice-for-Janitors campaign for centralized organizing and bargaining. Local unions have been forced to affiliate with giant district unions under leadership appointed by the unions' Washington directors. Instead of supporting rank-and-file organizing and initiatives, SEIU and other unions now concentrate on political action in Washington, funneling huge sums to Democratic political campaigns. Rather than empowering the rank-and-file to organize, the unions' Fabian leadership uses members' dues to buy a seat at the table of power.

Top-down, leadership driven labor politics has failed in the past and I suspect that it will fail in the future. Leaders can bargain for their members but a passive membership gives them little leverage against the powers of business and capital; and in a contest of campaign contributions, the capitalists will always win. Labor's power, its only power, is the workers' ability to disrupt and to draw attention to oppression. National politics and national leaders can help. Hanagan and Piven are absolutely right that national politics and top-down organizing can stimulate local action, as happened in 1900, 1936 and 1968 in France, 1969 in Italy, and in the USA in the 1930s. National leadership can provide a rallying cry for local campaigns, such as the 8-hour day in 1886 or the campaign against fascism and for unions in the 1930s. Leaders can use political leverage to restrain the use of repressive force, as happened in Michigan and Pennsylvania in the 1930s. They can support the efforts of local radicals with financial and ideological support, as the Communists did in promoting agricultural and other unions in the USA, or the CIO did in the USA in the 1930s.

National politics can never substitute for local action, and too much focus on the national and political drains the essential rank-and-file militancy of energy and even life. Yes, national campaigns are important both for the issues that can only be addressed nationally and because of the power of national action to motivate local campaigns, but the real life of a reignited labor movement must be on the local level because that is where we will find democracy and self-governance. For all that Madison argued that a republic *could* be large, and that size *could* help protect a republic from factions, democratic participation works best on the local level where people deal with their community's problems through direct participation. To rehabilitate popular the labor movement and democracy in general, people must see that they have real and direct power. Voter absenteeism in *prud'hommes* elections is not a sign of disinterest in the problems of those communities or satisfaction with the ruling elites; rather it is a protest against institutions that are seen to be unresponsive to popular concerns expressed only through voting. We need to build institutions for direct worker governance beginning with establishing shop stewards and other direct agents of worker control. Workers will participate if they have the opportunity to exercise the real power that would give their participation meaning.

Rather than centralizing resources and power for national political action, we need to empower local unions and their rank-and-file to take on local problems while ensuring that local interests have a strong voice in regional and national actions even against national union leaders and staff.

Even strong local control is no guarantee of a reignited and democratic labor movement. Democratically managed, strong locals can together produce a fractured, isolated, weak and socially undemocratic craft union movement. There is a long history of isolated craft local unions who establish little islands of monopoly power before gradually dying in their stagnant workplaces and with their archaic skills. Who today remembers the once mighty Cigar Makers International Union? Or the International Molders Union? Such locals cannot constitute a revived labor movement because their vision of democracy *ends* at the workplace rather than leading to any broader assertion of popular control over the economy.

How to maintain local power, participation and democracy while still maintaining connections with others outside the union and even outside the working class? To begin, labor needs to acknowledge that capitalist exploitation is one part of a larger matrix of domination that includes racial, gender, and other forms of exploitation. There are historical models of unions extending their struggle beyond the workplace and building alliances with other democratic forces. Within the US experience, there are both unions that have involved themselves in broader struggles and community organizations that have spread into labor relations. The Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers–CIO, for example, fought for Civil Rights and the right to vote in the South.<sup>1</sup> Civil Rights unionism continued with union-sponsored Jobs with Justice and with nonunion-sponsored ‘Workers’ Centers’ organized throughout the USA to provide services, including legal protection, to immigrant workers; these organizations also, sometimes, have provided a forum for union organizing among new immigrants and other workers.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1973, 9to5, National Association of Working Women was one of several organizations that emerged in the early 1970s uniting women workers as both workers and as women.<sup>3</sup> Organized by Boston-area clerical workers who gathered in living rooms to discuss their grievances, 9to5 grew to be a national membership organization belonging to the AFL–CIO, struggling for traditional trade union rights and also to improve the social and political status of all women. Campaigning for higher wages and better working conditions, 9to5 also fights to ‘change attitudes’ with ‘ground-breaking research on issues affecting working women including-part-time and temporary work, workplace discrimination, family leave, welfare policy, office health and safety, and job retention. We’ve published best-selling books . . . 9to5’s national network of chapters and activists receive regular Action Alerts with legislative updates and organizing tips.’<sup>4</sup>

As a union that goes beyond any narrow concerns to struggle for democracy and rights both in and beyond the workplace, 9to5 has followed a trail blazed by the French *Bourses du travail* and by the Knights of Labor.<sup>5</sup> These precedents may not appear to be so auspicious: the *Bourses* survive but little of their *élan* survived the pre-World War I Clemenceau government. The Knights lingered for a decade after their mid-1880s heyday after the massive crackdown after the Haymarket Affair and the Knights’ campaign for southern civil rights. Both the Knights and the *Bourses* were crushed when their radical and democratic aspirations brought down on them

a powerful alliance of state and private power, the same fate that befell the Food and Tobacco workers and other leftwing CIO unions. Some unions have sought to avoid this fate by dropping their most radical demands and democratic aspirations.<sup>6</sup> We have seen, however, that this policy leads to a demobilized working class now unable or uninterested in defending unions. Ultimately, the labor movement cannot evade its responsibility to promote democracy even if it is risky. Democracy is the central vision of the movement; and by involving the energies and talents of the workers and allies, democracy is the central tool for empowering the movement. As we have seen, abandoning radical democratic claims drains the life out of the labor movement.

Today as ever in the past, the forces arrayed against labor are too powerful to promise success; but we should remember that labor *has* won. The trail blazed by the Food and Tobacco workers was followed by the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; the *Bourses* demand for leisure and opportunity was answered by Leon Blum's Popular Front governments in the 1930s.

We can win; but labor will win only by keeping its attention squarely where it belongs. The labor movement began in the struggle for democracy. To win, it must be democratic. Only a democratic movement can develop the power to win, only a democratic movement can attract the allies to win and only a democratic labor movement deserves to win.

Again, I would like to thank all four of the commentators, Collomp, Groux, Hanagan and Piven. I learned from them all. I feel honored at the thought they have given my work. I value the opportunity to engage seriously the issues raised.

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### Notes on contributor

Gerald Friedman, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, earned a PhD in economics from Harvard University. In addition to his 1998 book, *State-Making and Labor Movements. The United States and France, 1876–1914*, and his 2008 book *Reigniting the Labor Movement*, he is the author of numerous articles on topics in the labor history of the USA and Europe, as well as the evolution of economic thought and the history of slavery in the Americas. He is currently working on an intellectual biography of Richard Ely, an early American economist, as part of a larger study of the decline of institutionalism in American economics. Email: geraldfriedman71055@gmail.com

### Notes

1. Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
2. Janice Fine, *Worker Center: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2006).
3. See the discussion in Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *A Companion to American Women's History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 421–425.

4. 9to5, National Association of Working Women, '9to5, National Association of Working Women', <http://www.9to5.org/> (accessed 1 August 2009).
5. Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); James R. Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (1st ed.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); Jean Sagnes, *Le mouvement ouvrier en Languedoc: Syndicalistes et socialistes de l'Hérault de la fondation des bourses du travail à la naissance du Parti Communiste (Midi et son histoire)* (Toulouse: Privat, 1980); Fernand Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses du travail, origine – institutions – avenir* (Paris: Schleicher frères, 1902).
6. Gerald Friedman, *State-Making and Labor Movements: France and the United States, 1876–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).